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ABSTRACT

Differences in the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky concerning the relationship between thought and language are briefly described. Basically, Piaget's position is summarized as follows: the child's use of language is determined by the developmental level of his or her cognitive structures. Vygotsky's position is also summarized: operative thought in the child is closely integrated with linguistic experience and does in fact depend on language for its development. (RH)

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THE THEORIES OF PIAGET AND VYGOTSKY CONCERNING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THOUGHT AND LANGUAGE

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The Theories of Piaget and Vygotsky

Concerning the Relationship Between Thought and Language

An area of child development which has been of interest to many researchers, as well as to philosophers and practitioners, is the development of thinking and reasoning in the young child. Because it is very difficult to separate thinking from language, the relationship between these two processes is a natural outgrowth of an inquiry into the area of thinking.

The Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, is one of the world's leading authorities on cognitive development. In some of this writings, Piaget discussed the relationship between thought and language. He also has made a contribution in other areas of cognition and has provided insight into children and their development. Another investigator into the relationship between thought and language was the Russian, Lev Semenovich Vygotsky. Although not as well known as Piaget, Vygotsky also has made an impact in the area of cognitive development and language.

Both Piaget and Vygotsky developed similar concepts concerning the stages of cognitive development. A thorough discussion of their entire work is beyond the scope of this paper. Although many similarities do exist, the focus of this paper will be an area in which they are not in complete agreement. No attempt will be made here to evaluate either of these theories. Rather, a brief description will be presented of the major points made by both Piaget and Vygotsky. This could lead to the original works of Piaget and Vygotsky or even to theories which lie

somewhere in between the two theories presented here, such as the work of Bruner, Oliver, and Greenfield (1966).

Because of the complexity of the language-thought relationship, the question which comes to mind is, "Which comes first--idea or word?" Some would say this is an impossible question, but Piaget and Vygotsky both present an answer concerning this issue.

Piaget's first work in this area, The Language and Thought of the Child, was published in 1926. Vygotsky's book, Thought and Language, was published posthumously in 1934 but was not translated until 1962. Therefore, although Vygotsky was familiar with Piaget's early work, Piaget was not acquainted with Vygotsky's work until the 1962 translation (Piaget, 1962). When writing comments on Vygotsky's book, Piaget (1962) pointed out that his own views had developed and changed in the course of his work and that he and Vygotsky were in much more agreement than they had been earlier. However, even though Piaget's ideas changed, he did not admit complete agreement with the ideas presented by Vygotsky in his 1934 book. Piaget (1962) expressed regret over the fact that Vygotsky's death in 1934 did not allow for a personal discussion between the two concerning both the areas of their agreement and disagreement.

Piaget's Position on Language and Thought

In The Language and Thought of the Child (1926/1967), Piaget gave attention to the extent to which children speak to each other and think socially and the amount of understanding children have when they talk together. He also discussed the development of egocentric speech and its function in the thought processes of the child. In the observations

recorded in this book, Piaget noted a large amount of egocentric speech among preschool children. In children over age 7, a greater amount of socialized speech emerged. The non-communicative speech which Piaget referred to as egocentric speech involves, among other things, children talking aloud to and about themselves even when in the presence of other children. On the other hand, socialized speech is more interactive with real dialogue and the giving and receiving of information. An important point, according to Piaget, is that the egocentric speech of young children does not determine their behavior; rather it is a verbal accompaniment to behavior (Pflaum-Conner, 1978). Therefore, the functional use of language, in Piaget's theory, is limited by what already has been achieved in cognitive development.

In a later work, Piaget (1970) re-emphasized his position when he said, "This, in fact, is our hypotheses: that the roots of logical thought are not to be found in language alone, even though language coordinators are important, but are to be found more generally in the coordination of actions, which are the basis of reflective abstractions" (p. 18). As is pointed out in this quote, Piaget did not deny the importance of language. He gave it an important role but also cautioned that it actually can interfere at times. He said, "Mainly, language serves to translate what is already understood; or else language may even present a danger if it is used to introduce an idea which is not yet accessible" (Piaget, 1964, p. 15).

According to Piaget, the development of the child's own symbolic structures does not depend upon language. The lingual signs must be assimilated and accommodated by the child, but to find meaning for

himself or herself, the symbolic structuring must come first and nct by confused by adult language structures (Smith, Goodman, & Meredith, 1970).

In an interpretive work on Piaget, Furth (1970) went so far as to say, "How can anyone seriously suggest that language is the appropriate, if not indispensable tool for the development of thinking? Indeed . . . it is my contention that thinking is the indispensable tool for using language appropriately" (p. 58). Furth went on to emphasize that verbal statements and propositions do not serve as "primary nourishment" of the child's intelligence until the approach to the stage of formal operational functioning. In another work, Furth (1966) used research and experience with deaf children to support his position. His contention was that since cognitive development proceeds in children who have no exposure to verbal language, it does not hold that the language of society is of indispensable importance in the development of thinking. Dale (1972) however, pointed out a possible explanation for Furth's findings. Many deaf children do in fact acquire some form of manual communication. He contended that this may serve deaf children in ways similar to the functions of oral language for hearing children.

In another well-known book in which Ginsburg and Opper (1969) explain the work of Piaget, it was pointed out that "Piaget argues that language plays a limited, but not negligible, role in the formation of the child's thought" (p. 85). The illustration which was given in which language does influence thought is when an adult uses a word to refer to a class of things and the child therefore is made aware of

adult reasoning. They pointed out, however, that, "It is probably fair to say that the child's thought depends less on his language than his language does on this thought" (p. 85).

Piaget (1967) clearly answered, from his point of view, the question, "Which comes first, idea or word?" He said:

> As language is only a particular form of the symbolic function and as the individual symbol is certainly simpler than the collective sign, it is permissible to conclude that thought precedes language . . . Language is not enough to explain thought, because the structures that characterize thought have their roots in action and in sensori-motor mechanisms that are deeper than linguistics. (pp. 91, 98)

Vygotsky's Position on Language and Thought

As was pointed out earlier, Vygotsky was familiar with the early works of Piaget when he did his writing. In his book, Vygotsky (1934/1962) was critical of Piaget's early treatment of egocentric speech. He maintained that egocentric speech develops into "inner speech," as he called it, and has a very definite role in the activity of the child. Piaget (1926/1967) originally implied that egocentric speech serves no useful function in the child's behavior and simply atrophies as the child approaches school age. Piaget (1962) later somewhat modified his position and stated, "It took me some time to see, it is true, that the roots of logical operation lie deeper than the linguistic connections, and that my early study of thinking was centered too much of its linguistic aspect" (p. 5).

In her book, Pflaum-Conner (1978) devoted a section to a discussion of the ideas of Vygotsky. In her interpretation, she seemed to put external speech, inner speech, and thought on a continuum developing in that order. She said, "External speech is prerequisite to the inner speech which precedes mature thought. Vygotsky describes inner speech as a sort of silent speech that occurs before real thought begins. In fact, inner speech leads to thought" (p. 9).

Vygotsky did not describe inner speech as merely accompanying thought, as did Piaget. He said rather that it "serves mental orientation and conscious understanding . . . . Inner speech is not the interior aspect of external speech--it is a function in itself" (Vygotsky, 1934/1962, p. 133).

Vygotsky viewed speaking and thinking as initially developing as two separate processes which become interrelated at about 2 years of age. The early speaking of the child, according to Vygotsky, is not rational and the thinking is not verbal. At about 2 years of age the child comes to realize that a word represents a thing, and more and more words are learned. As this happens, speaking and thinking converge even more, and language emerges (Mosenthal, 1975). Vygotsky (1934/1962) summarized his overall analysis of development as follows:

1. In their ontogenetic development, thought and speech have different roots.
2. In the speech development of the child, we can with certainty establish a preintellectual stage, and in his thought development, a prelinguistic stage.

3. Up to a certain point in time, the two follow different lines, independently of each other.

4. At a certain point these lines meet, whereupon thought becomes verbal and speech rational. (p. 44)

Vygotsky showed great concern for dialogue between children and adults. Smith, Goodman, and Meredith (1970) said, "The environmental language is as real in Vygotsky's view as the objects in the environment and is pivotal in the development of the child's thinking" (p. 115). This dialogue between adult and child is critical and, in Vygotsky's view, stimulates cognitive growth. Names and language structures are learned from this dialogue. Concept development is initiated by adult models and structured by the individual with further dialogue as a source (Pflaum-Conner, 1978).

Cazden (1972) gave an example, from a Vygotskian viewpoint, of how a word serves to lead the thinking of a child to the formation of a concept. The illustration used is the concept of brother. A word is probably necessary to bind together this relational concept which has been abstracted from the child's experience. To Vygotsky, the word first functions as "an invitation to a concept" (Cazden, 1972, p. 229).

Again the question is answered, "Which comes first, idea or word?" Vygotsky (1934/1962) said, "The relation of thought to word is not a thing but a process, a continual movement back and forth from thought to word and from word to thought. Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence though them" (p. 125).

Summary

The works of both Piaget and Vygotsky have had an impact in the area of cognition and child development. Basically, their stages of conceptual development are quite similar. One area of disagreement, as outlined in this paper, is their view of the relationship between thought and language. Bain (1975) presented a very concise summary of their views by saying that Vygotsky put language in a leading role whereas Piaget put language in the role of follower. Basically, Piaget's position was that the child's use of language is determined by the developmental level of his or her cognitive structures and not the other way around. Vygotsky's position was that operative thought is intimately integrated with linguistic experience and does in fact depend on language for its development.

Research has been conducted which supports both of these views. Bain (1975) cited many of these sources and emphasized the importance of the common ground between the ideas of Piaget and Vygotsky. Both theories have implications for teaching and working with young children. Regardless of the position taken with one or the other of these theorists or if a position is taken somewhere in between, the contributions of both Piaget and Vygotsky to the field of child development must be recognized as important.

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